Intelligence Erosion and American Power Limits

How a Public Intelligence Rift Is Exposing a Deeper Breakdown in U.S. Strategic Coherence

Jahara "FRANKY" Matisek
Eagle Intelligence Reports

April 2, 2026

Published at Eagle Intelligence Reports:
https://eagleintelreports.com/intelligence-erosion-and-american-power-limits/

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how a public intelligence dispute over Iran's nuclear threat — centred on the resignation of National Counterterrorism Center Director Joe Kent and conflicting testimony from Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard — signals a deeper structural breakdown in the United States' ability to convert intelligence into coherent strategy. The paper argues that the erosion of a shared strategic reality within the American national security system is no longer a theoretical risk but an observable condition, with measurable consequences for deterrence, alliance cohesion, and adversary behaviour. It dissects the anatomy of the intelligence disagreement across three dimensions — capabilities, intentions, and timing — and traces the institutional consequences of politicised intelligence: analytical risk aversion, talent attrition, and the gradual decoupling of intelligence from policy. The analysis concludes that the deeper warning of this moment extends well beyond Iran; it concerns the long-term erosion of the institutional foundations of American intelligence and the structural limits this places on the exercise of U.S. power.

Keywords: U.S. intelligence community, national security, Iran war, strategic coherence, politicised intelligence, deterrence, Joe Kent, Tulsi Gabbard, American power, institutional erosion, nuclear threat assessment, intelligence failure

Introduction

A public intelligence rift over Iran is exposing a deeper breakdown in how the United States interprets threats and turns intelligence into strategy.

The erosion of a shared strategic reality within the American national security system is no longer a theoretical risk — it is already unfolding. The resignation of the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Joe Kent, amid conflicting assessments of Iran's nuclear threat is not merely bureaucratic friction in Washington. It signals a deeper breakdown in the system's ability to sustain a coherent strategic baseline.

> ***The erosion of a shared strategic reality within the American national security system is no longer a theoretical risk — it is already unfolding.***

Kent resigned after arguing that Iran posed 'no imminent threat' to the United States, directly contradicting the administration's justification for military action. His departure came alongside public scrutiny of Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's Senate testimony, in which she stated that Iran had made no effort to rebuild enrichment capabilities since the summer 2025 Operation Midnight Hammer, even as the administration continued to justify ongoing strikes.

This dispute matters because modern warfare is waged with more than ships and aircraft; it is waged with information. A functioning national security system depends on its ability to generate a common operating picture of an adversary's capabilities, intentions, and thresholds. Intelligence is supposed to provide this baseline reality, bridging the gap between raw data and a coherent strategy.

When the 18 organizations of the intelligence community cannot produce a trusted consensus, the danger isn't just procedural chaos. It's that military power becomes unmoored from facts and reality, and begins operating on a blurred mix of intelligence, assumptions, and politicized narratives, which makes Kent's resignation so important.

The real danger emerges when debates over a threat become so public and politically charged that the intelligence system itself no longer appears authoritative, echoing the failures in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War, and the subsequent inability to find weapons of mass destruction.

Once U.S. credibility is openly contested, the country loses a hidden foundation of its power: the ability to convince itself, and others, that its actions are based on a stable reading of reality. This is where a hegemon risks shifting from a rules-based actor to one driven primarily by narrow self-interest.

In an age of social media and digitally amplified information flows, this dissent does not stay in classified channels. It becomes a feature of the information age itself, eroding credibility during a conflict. In effect, it means the undermining of American national interests and the gradual disintegration of the global order.

Anatomy of the Disagreement

To understand the growing risk, the open intelligence dispute must be clearly dissected. Intelligence disputes are not binary. They revolve around an adversary's capabilities, their intentions, and/or the timing of a threat. These categories are not interchangeable, as a dispute over capabilities disrupts the analytic foundation of the intelligence process.

> ***Intelligence disputes are not binary. They revolve around an adversary's capabilities, their intentions, and/or the timing of a threat.***

A dispute over intentions prioritises signaling and diplomacy. A dispute over timing forces a choice between preemptive action and waiting. In the case of the Iran war, this distinction becomes more critical. A debate over whether Tehran could build a nuclear weapon is fundamentally different from whether it intends to do so, and different still from any claim that it poses an imminent threat — a distinction that can determine whether policymakers choose restraint or sustained military action.

Policy, however, almost never follows intelligence mechanically. Decision makers operate in the friction of the real world, navigating partial information, alliance pressures, and public fears. The luxury of certainty does not exist. Strategy therefore becomes a balancing act: a test to distinguish reality from deception, weighed against the calculations of deterrence, risks, and the perceived costs and benefits of inaction. This places the burden on political leaders to decide whether intelligence is a tool to manage uncertainty or a narrative used to justify a preferred outcome.

The fallout from this ambiguity means that different countries interpret these signals in different ways. Israel, reliant on American resolve, may see this internal fracture as a sign of unreliability at a moment when deterrence depends on consistency and credibility. European allies, already wary of American volatility, will likely view it as more evidence of a chaotic policy process.

For Iran, the opportunity is obvious. A divided Washington encourages Tehran to probe boundaries and absorb blows, betting that American political cohesion — or at least its coalition unity — will erode first. For China and Russia, the lesson is broader: the United

States remains a military giant, but its political process for converting intelligence into strategy appears increasingly fragmented.

This is not simply a regional signal. It is a global indicator of how reliably the United States can convert intelligence into strategy under pressure, and why this uncertainty is toxic for deterrence. Strategic signaling is initially about military capability; it is ultimately about convincing others that a disciplined, predictable process governs its use. When intelligence, rhetoric, and action diverge so openly, Washington emits a stream of conflicting signals.

Some will see recklessness. Others will see hesitation masked as resolve. Neither interpretation commands respect. Both, in fact, raise the risk of catastrophic miscalculation by making it impossible for allies or adversaries to clearly understand America's red lines.

The Institutional Consequences

The bigger question extends beyond how the Iran war ends. One possibility is renewed coordination to maintain American prestige, where political leadership and the intelligence community close ranks to restore a coherent common operating picture. This is the ideal, but given the current rancor in Washington and broader political fragmentation, the trajectory appears to be moving away from this outcome.

A second possibility is one of managed tension within the intelligence community, where disagreement persists but remains within tolerable institutional bounds. The most consequential scenario, however, is institutional recalibration under strain. In that version, intelligence agencies grow more cautious, and political leaders increasingly rely on informal channels, instinct, and media-driven narratives.

In such a scenario, trust between intelligence analysis and policy erodes further. If that occurs, the real damage will not be confined to just Iran. Politicized uses of intelligence will shape how the United States responds to future crises.

This institutional dimension will likely matter more than the military outcome of operations against Iran. The United States can absorb tactical mistakes, as it has in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam. The bigger danger is the long-term erosion of the relationship between intelligence and political leadership.

Once policymakers, and the public more broadly, lose trust in intelligence as a credible analytic foundation — or once intelligence professionals begin assuming their work will be selectively used — the process itself begins to degrade, undermining the coherence of strategy. At that point, the problem is no longer one disputed assessment about Iran. It becomes a structural failure in how American power is exercised.

> ***Once policymakers and the public lose trust in intelligence as a credible analytic foundation, the institutional process itself begins to degrade.***

Furthermore, this erosion of trust has a corrosive effect on individuals working in national security. When objective analysis is perceived as political defiance, it creates a culture of risk aversion within the intelligence community. Talented personnel may choose to leave public service rather than navigate the political minefield, while those who remain may self-censor, producing analysis that is politically safe but strategically inadequate. This dynamic risks creating a quiet institutional crisis as a consequence of the Iran war. It also degrades the ability of the United States to anticipate and respond to future threats.

The deeper issue raised by the intelligence debate and Kent's resignation is not merely routine Washington infighting. It is a fundamental question of competence: can the American national security system still integrate intelligence, policy, and military action into a coherent strategy?

If that capacity weakens, the consequences will undermine America's ability to respond effectively in the next crisis or war. They will shape how allies judge American reliability, how adversaries test American thresholds, and how future presidents will make decisions under uncertainty.

American military might is not going anywhere, but that capacity is of limited value if the institutions that interpret threats and align means with ends begin to fray. That is the real warning of this moment, because it extends beyond Iran. It is about the erosion of the institutional foundations of intelligence, which will determine the limits of American power.

About the Author

Jahara "FRANKY" Matisek

Lt. Col. Jahara "Franky" Matisek is a U.S. Air Force command pilot specialising in conflict, strategy, and security assistance. He has taught at the U.S. Air Force Academy and the U.S. Naval War College and is the author of two books. He has published over 120 articles on warfare, strategy, and national security. Author profile: eagleintelreports.com/author/jahara-matisek/

** Views are his own and not the official position of the U.S. Naval War College, U.S. Air Force, Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. Government.*

Citation

Matisek, Jahara "FRANKY". "Intelligence Erosion and American Power Limits." *Eagle Intelligence Reports*, April 2, 2026.

Original publication:

https://eagleintelreports.com/intelligence-erosion-and-american-power-limits/

© 2026 Eagle Intelligence Reports. All rights reserved. Distributed for academic and policy research purposes only.
Reg. No.: J2025045739001 | VAT: RO52032420 | Bucharest, Romania